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ABSTRACT

The role of language structure in the classroom is discussed, and the limitations of the formal analysis of language is enumerated. It is argued that most language problems derive not from difficulties with language form, but from covert differences in value which are characteristically associated with those forms. Examples are given of conflicts in the lexicon due to cultural values, and it is noted that the traditional approach to cognate forms is inadequate. As a consequence, a phenomenological interpretation of the lexicon is suggested as a viable alternative for coping with conflicts of value in language. This paper provides a model for resolving lexical conflicts due to discrepancies in value, and recognizes the theoretical frameworks of existential sociology and cognitive psychology. (Author)

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CONFLICTS OF VALUE IN LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION

A commo belief among language teachers and linguists is that when a student develops competency in the grammar of a language, he will be able to use it to communicate more effectively. This belief is part of a long tradition which originated in the teaching of Greek and Latin in Europe (Applebee, 1974; Kelly, 1969) where the restrictive methodology of rote learning played a major role. This preoccupation with linguistic codes is still prevalent in the curriculum of most language teaching programs in the form of pattern drills, and has only recently been challenged by Savignon (1972). Her research demonstrates that when students were provided the opportunity to use language in a genuine interactive situation rather than follow prefabricated dialogues, these students not only acquired a communicative competence of the language, but they also acquired a working knowledge of grammar. Many even surpassed those whose training consisted of rigorous grammatical training. What is important about this research is that it demonstrates that there are limitations to the current grammar orientation in foreign language classrooms.

The work of Savignon (1972) raises several interesting questions about the sociolinguistic nature of language. It forces us to look beyond the traditional model of information theory with its mechanical

emphasis on encoding and decoding messages through a communicative channel (Singh, 1966). Moreover, it tells us that language use cannot be divorced from social and cultural assumptions. Hence, when a failure to communicate occurs, it is not always due to a conflict over the form and structure of the linguistic code. It may have more to do with the assumptions of the speaker and the expectations of the hearer. Where they differ, communication fails (Borden, 1971). In this paper we describe how such conflicts arise in a sociolinguistic context, and we provide an explanation of this phenomenon within the theoretical framework of existential sociology (Manning, 1973).

CONFLICTS IN LEXICAL VALUES

With the advent of generative semantics (Gruber, 1965), linguists have renewed their interest in the structure of words and their relationships to grammar (Fillmore, 1968; McCawley, 1971). One aspect of generative lexicology which has not received adequate consideration, and which has numerous implications for the language classroom is that which Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) calls value. As a case in point, consider the use of the word power in English as compared with its lexical equivalent pouver in French. This word has a distributive meaning in the former, and this is evidenced by the use of such terms as "student power" and "Black power". Such a distributive meaning is inconceivable in French. Pouvoir is something which you can either have or lack (Hegy, 1975). Hence, "student power" is a far more threatening and radical concept in French than it is in English. But, the differences in value do not end here. There is also the question of how one acquires power.

In the English-speaking world, it is acquired by force, but in France it is allegedly conceded by consensus on the assumption that the new power will be just and rational (Hegy, 1975).

Your reaction to these examples may be one of complacency. "Well," you might say, "that's nothing new. These words are merely false cognates." Should this be your reaction, then you have already missed the major point of our discussion. Conflicts or disparities at the lexical level are superficial. What is important is that these lexical forms represent underlying differences of cultural and social values, and these values should be of central concern. To merely label these differences as false cognates is tantamount to a short circuit of inquiry. The question that we should be asking, on the other hand, must go beyond an analysis of language conflicts on a lexical level. Since false cognates are best understood as a relexification of one's own native language, our questions should be directed at the implicit value systems which are incorporated into the lexicon of a language. We must draw attention to the background knowledge which pervades a social context. In essence, we must ask about the assumptions of the speaker and the expectations of the hearer in a communicative context. Hence, when we learn a foreign language we are not merely learning a formal linguistic system, but we are learning a whole new framework of social values. It is for this reason that false cognates only represent the tip of the iceberg.

THE INFERENTIAL STRUCTURE OF DISCOURSE

The fact that a theory of communication must transcend the syntax of language is evident from current research in ethnomethodology

(Garfinkel, 1967). In a normal conversation, background information plays a major role. What is said is usually not as important as what is implied or inferred from the situation. Consider, for example, the following natural use of language:

Husband: Dana succeeded in putting a penny in a parking meter today without being picked up.

Wife: Did you take him to the record store?

Husband: No, to the shoe repair shop.

Wife: What for?

Husband: I got some new shoe laces for my shoes.

Wife: Your loafers need new heels badly.

(Garfinkel, 1967:25-26)

The elliptical nature of this conversation is typical of ordinary language use. For the uninvolved observer who does not share the assumptions and expectations which form the background knowledge, it may be rather meaningless or somewhat confusing. Clearly, those who are involved in the conversation do not need to verbalize this background information which, by the way, prefabricated dialogues do in language textbooks. This inferential nature of language takes on a greater importance when we realize that background assumptions may differ radically across cultures. As a consequence, conflicts in bilingualism are essentially due to the disparate nature of cross-cultural assumptions and expectations. They are due to differences in value.

Jakobovits and Gordon (1974) make a similar point. Their approach to resolving linguistic conflicts is informative. Rather than resort to a barrage of grammatical drills and exercises, they emphasize and focus

on those conflicts which result from differences in value. Their analysis and resolution of the problem in terms of transactional analysis is a logical one as it immediately centers on the underlying source of the problem.

THE EMERGENCE OF VALUE SYSTEMS

Now that we have succeeded in shifting our focus from the linguistic code to the background knowledge of assumptions and expectations, let us reformulate the concept of value within the framework of existential sociology. In order to accomplish this, however, let us first explain what we mean by this term.

The positivistic tradition of Durkheim which approaches social knowledge as observable and quantifiable facts in a manner comparable to the physical sciences (Durkheim, 1897) has been a major influence in Sociology. In contrast to this view, there is a large body of criticism in the field which argues for a humanistic description of man as a social being. This school of thought appears under such diverse titles as the Sociology of Knowledge (Mannheim, 1952), Phenomenology (Wagner, 1970), Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), and Cognitive Sociology (Cicourel, 1974). We shall follow the terminology of Manning (1973) and describe these under the rubric of "Existential Sociology." According to this new approach, the position of man in the social world is intuitively and unavoidably connected with the experiences of everyday life. It is from this situational context that he constructs a theory of social reality.

> "What is <u>real</u> to a Tibetan monk may not be real to an American businessman. The <u>knowledge</u> of the criminal differs from the <u>knowledge</u> of the criminologist. It

> follows that specific agglomerates of reality and knowledge pertains to specific social contexts, and that these relationships will have to be included in an adequate sociological analysis of these contexts. . . . The need for a sociology of knowledge is thus already given with the observable differences between societies in terms of what is taken for granted or knowledge in them. . . . (it) is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality."
>
> (Berger and Luckman, 1966:3)

It is from these personal and social perspectives that Saussurean values develop as a frame of reference.

> "Frames of reference influence our perception, but even more they influence our interpretation of what we see, and the formulation of plans of action."
>
> (Holzner, 1968:14)

Our previous discussion of how assumptions and expectations form the background knowledge of language is directly related to the concept of existential sociology, and explains why certain social conflicts are mistaken for linguistic conflicts. Because language is our medium of expression, we attempt to resolve conflicts by adjusting linguistic codes. What has been consistently overlooked, however, is that even when the same code is used, miscommunication can result. Consider, for example, the sentence:

"We are revolting."

Your response to this statement could be: "Yes, you are!" or "Yes, you do!" Obviously, each response presupposes a different set of background assumptions.

The way in which children learn to cope with reality is also directly related to our discussion of background assumptions and social plans of

action. The child in the barrio will face a different social environment from the child in the suburbs. Hence, their method for coping with social reality will differ. These coping strategies develop into cognitive styles (Ramírez and Castañeda, 1974) so that it is not surprising to find that children from the barrio approach the acquisition of knowledge in a manner which is substantially different from the children of suburbia. These children have different plans of social action. The middle class child is field independent, and the child from the inner city or the barrio is field sensitive. The conflict occurs in the language classroom because the school system favors the cognitive strategies of the middle class child and fails to give recognition to the field sensitive child. Language teachers should recognize this fact. Many language problems are not due to language per se, but to differences in social value within a theoretical framework of the sociology of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Language teachers must shift their focus from language as a code to the background knowledge which the child brings to the language classroom. They must develop an approach to language education which recognizes cultural and social diversity. Since this has not been a part of their academic training, it appears that inservice training will be necessary. The theoretical model for this special training is clearly within the framework of existential sociology, and cognitive psychology (Neisser, 1967). What we are arguing for, in essence, is a cognitive sociology approach to language.

APPENDIX

FALSE COGNATES IN SPANISH AND ENGLISH

1. ENGLISH: sophisticated
In the Anglo world, this is a positive concept, and the word is complimentary.

SPANISH: sofisticada
In Spanish, the word conveys a negative feeling; it is an insult and implies putting on airs, and being phony.

COMMENT:
A teacher may mean well when referring to the mother of a Spanish-speaking child as being sophisticated, but may find that the mother and her child have been insulted.

2. ENGLISH: family
The Anglo concept of family generally implies the nuclear group of a father, mother, and two children.

SPANISH: familia
In the Spanish-speaking world, the term connotes the nuclear and the extended family as well as friends.

COMMENT:
A Spanish-speaking child may become confused, or even hurt, if corrected by the teacher when referring to a grandparent, uncle, or friend of his parents as a part of his family. This is expecially true where love and affection are connoted by this term.

3. ENGLISH: nepotism
This is a bad word to the Anglo and is considered dishonest, undemocratic, and unfortunate politically.

SPANISH: nepotismo
In the Hispanic culture with the importance given to the extended family, "nepotismo" is an actepted, kind, and intelligent act.

COMMENT:
In criticizing Chicano, Cuban, or Puerto Rican politicians and bureaucrats for nepotism, the teacher is, in reality, attacking the Spanish-speaking student's culturally oriented value system.

4. ENGLISH: American
To the Anglo, the term refers to a person who is a citizen of the U.S.

SPANISH: americano
To the Spanish-speaker, it includes the citizens and nations of all the Americas.

COMMENT:
To attempt to separate the Spanish-speaking "estadounidense" from the rest of the Americas may bring a hostile reaction, especially from the politically oriented "hispano" who may be oriented towards and associated with the Third World Movement.

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